

Parenting while apart: experiences of parents of children growing up in foster care (2008-9) RES-000-22-2606

End of award report to the Economic and Social Research Council: June 2009

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Background

The stability and well-being of children growing up in foster care will be affected by many factors in the child and the foster family. But one key factor will be the nature of their ongoing relationship with their families, most commonly through face to face contact. Although this is recognised to be a significant issue for children and young people, the *experience* of parents and the *models of social work practice* with parents have not received the same amount of attention as the experiences of and work with foster carers and foster children.

The Government White Paper *Care Matters: Time for Change* (DfES 2007) stressed the importance of achieving better outcomes for children in care by improving the quality of foster care through to adulthood and by improving the quality of social work practice. It is essential to include in that development of social work practice a commitment to good practice with parents, informed by parents' experiences, as this too can contribute to foster children's well-being and long-term stability.

This report will outline how the project has met its objectives and then explain the conduct of the study, the key findings and activities for dissemination.

Objectives

1. *To improve our understanding of the experience of parents who are separated from their children in foster care, through linked studies at the University of East Anglia, the University of Gothenburg, Sweden and the University of Bergen, Norway. This understanding to be linked to the following objectives:*

- *From a psychosocial point of view, to investigate how parents manage their experience of separation and the process of continuing to be parents for children who are being parented day to day by foster carers and for whom the local authority is the corporate parent.*

This objective was achieved through analysis of detailed interview / focus group data with a sample of 32 parents. They were all parenting in contexts of adversity, but were diverse in their histories, and also in their perceived role in their children coming into care and their attitude to them remaining in care. The study more than met our expectations in terms of this objective in all three sites – Sweden, Norway and the UK. We all achieved good data, having not been sure beforehand whether parents would trust us with the details of their lives, including the full range of sad, guilty and angry feelings.

- *From a child welfare point of view, to identify the kinds of processes and practice that may be helpful in building constructive relationships with parents that may go on to have a positive effect on children's development, security and stability.*

Because parents' accounts were so detailed it was possible to see how relationships between parents and social workers, and parents and foster carers, were having a considerable impact on their feelings towards the children, the placement and themselves as parents.

Although it is difficult to make causal links between the quality of relationships between adult 'parents' (parents, foster carers and social workers) and child outcomes, the parent data clearly distinguished between helpful relationships that reassured them about the children's welfare and those that left them feeling anxious about the children and unable to resolve their feelings of grief and anger, leading to tensions around contact. We also know from research in the field of separation and divorce that hostile parents who do not communicate are likely to make separation more harmful to children. Comparison across the three national sites confirmed the range of constructive or hostile relationships, the differential potential benefits / risks to children and the importance of practice that promotes constructive relationships.

- *From a policy and planning point of view, to explore what kinds of services and practice parents find helpful in their parenting role.*

The interviews, as well as the parent and social worker focus groups, enabled us to focus on key areas of practice – particularly around child protection processes, court and contact between children and parents. Social worker focus groups were helpful in offering their perspective on these issues – as well as the broader but linked question of how social work time can and should be found to support parents at these stressful times.

For this objective, as for the others, it was clear that services and practice needed to distinguish carefully between those parents who were a continuing risk to their children's well-being and those who could be helped to make a more constructive contribution in their children's lives. It seems likely, however, that most parents, even those who remain angry, will be more supportive of the child and the placement if they receive some degree of support themselves.

2. To develop practice models for working constructively with birth parents that can also help to promote the well-being and stability of foster children.

Internationally there continue to be major concerns about the nature of permanence in foster care and the relative roles of biological parents, foster parents and the state as corporate parents. In the UK, Norway and Sweden, the findings of this joint project will be placed in the context of wider studies of children growing up in foster care. The formulation of models of good practice will take place as the three partners continue to work together on publications in the coming 6-12 months, but a child welfare focus combined with listening to parents will be key to practice.

Methods

The UK project proposal followed the design agreed with the parallel projects in Norway and Sweden. It involved a combination of semi-structured interviews with parents and

separate parent and social worker focus groups. The study was conducted between January 2008 and March 2009, with data collection between March and November 2008.

Two aspects of the project changed after the proposal stage. First was the decision to conduct parent interviews prior to parent focus groups rather than afterwards, to accommodate parents who may not wish to attend a group. The second change was that the project was extended from 12 to 15 months, with the agreement of the ESRC, to accommodate a change in research associate for the final stage of the project.

Accessing the interview sample

Access to the sample of parents was negotiated separately with three local authorities (two shire counties, one inner London borough), with social workers asked to identify potential participants. This had some advantages, in that social workers had knowledge of whether a parent might be willing to speak with us or was in crisis at that time or presented any risk to the researcher. However, there was a risk that the sample may not have been representative of parents of children in foster care. In fact, the sample had a good range of parents, some of whom were very co-operative and others who were very angry and had been aggressive towards workers in the past.

The profile of the interview sample

The criteria for the sample set out in the original proposal was 25-30 parents of foster children who were under the age of 10 at first placement and who have been in a foster family for at least a year. In total there were 29 interviews conducted with 32 parents (3 interviews were with both parents). The children were aged between birth and fourteen when they first entered care, with an average age of six.

The thirty two parents interviewed had 120 children between them and three quarters of the children (90) had been looked after at some point. Of the 90 children who had been looked after at some stage, Figure 1 (below) shows their location at the time of interview.

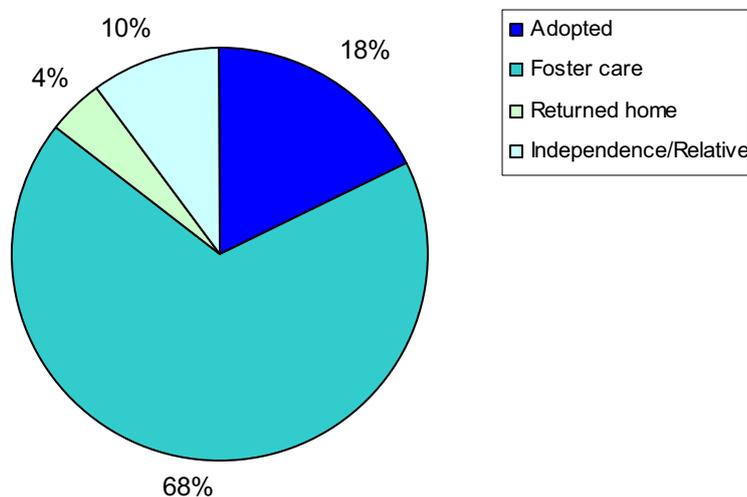


Figure 1 showing the location of children who had been looked after (n=90)

Sixty one (68%) children were currently living in foster care. These children ranged in age from 4 years to 18 years, with an average age of 11. The rest had been adopted, were living independently or had returned home.

Parents were aged between 29 and 55 with a mean age of 40. As is common in family research and children's services, there was more involvement from mothers (75%, 24) than fathers (25%, 8) (see Table 1). Nineteen percent (6) of parents interviewed were from an

ethnic minority, and two parents had mixed heritage children, providing representation from different ethnicities and cultures. The majority of parents were single (53%, 17). Some had found new partners (22%, 7), but some parents had stayed together despite the difficulties they had faced (25%, 8). Most parents were not working at the time of interview (81%, 26), mainly due to their mental health, drug and alcohol treatment or physical health problems.

Demographic	Frequency	% (n=32)
Female	24	75%
Male	8	25%
Not working	26	81%
Employed in some capacity	4	13%
Student	1	3%
In prison	1	3%
Single	17	53%
Co-habiting with parent	8	25%
Co-habiting with new partner	7	22%
White British	26	81%
Black Caribbean	4	13%
Indian	1	3
Mixed heritage: White British and Indian	1	3

Table 1 Demographic information of the interview sample

The parents reported a range of difficulties in their lives (see Figure 2), in particular drug and alcohol misuse (56%), domestic violence (34%) and mental illness (31%), that had affected their parenting adversely and contributed to varying degrees to their children becoming looked after.

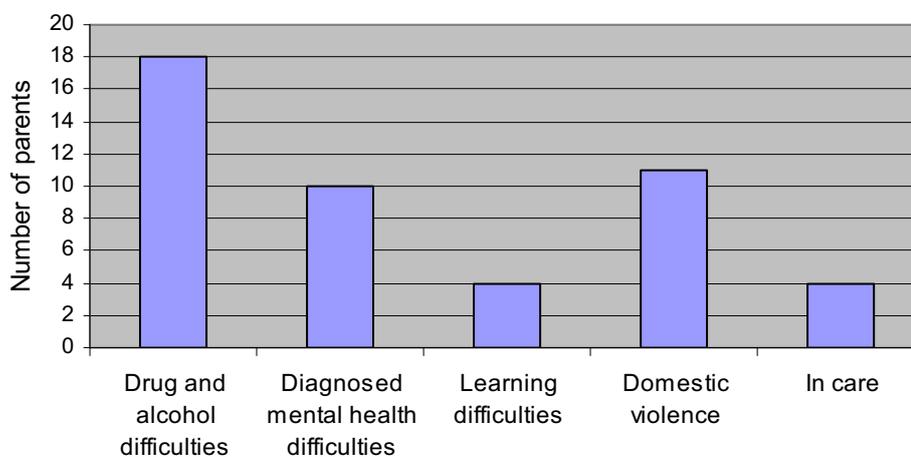


Figure 2 Parents with difficulties

Conducting the interviews

The first phase of the research involved interviewing parents about their experience of being a parent with a child growing up in foster care. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, and the research aims, semi-structured qualitative interviews were felt to be the best method to collect useful data about parents' perspectives. In practice this method worked well and parents were willing to tell the researcher their story, often in quite some detail.

The parent interviews focused on the changing nature of their parenting role from the child's birth to the present day, with a special focus on the impact of the child going into

care and remaining apart from them through childhood. The role of contact was of particular interest, but so also were issues around the degree of parental involvement in decision making and, for older children, the issues around leaving care. The interview schedule's linear approach worked well, creating flowing, but relevant, conversation which provided rich data. Interviews lasted between one hour and three and half hours in total, with most interviews taking around two hours. Overall the interviews offered full accounts of events, ideas and emotions.

Social worker focus groups

A semi-structured social worker focus group was held in each of the three local authorities, so that social workers' perspectives and experiences could be taken into account in developing models of good practice. The agenda of the focus groups was similar to the agenda used in the parent groups to allow for comparison and to ensure the focus of discussion was tied into the issues emerging from the parent interviews. These groups functioned very well and many of the concerns brought up by social workers were the same as those highlighted by the parents. These focus groups enabled the project to have a more complete picture of the dilemmas that social workers face in trying to manage relationships and systems.

Parent focus groups

The purpose of the focus groups was for parents to share their experiences of managing their parenting role and the dilemmas of being involved in complex bureaucratic systems. These focus groups were also used to explore ideas and themes emerging from the interviews and to generate ideas for social work practice. Focus groups took place in a neutral meeting room rather than at a social services office, so that parents would feel more comfortable when commenting on their experiences of services.

In the original proposal it was hoped that focus groups of about five-seven parents would be set up in each of the three local authorities. However, in spite of encouragement, only two parents attended the one shire county focus group and three parents attended the London Borough focus group. It was decided not to hold a parent focus group in the other shire county, because all seven parents interviewed were accessed via one team.

The parents were offered another voucher for a supermarket of their choice (having also received vouchers for the interviews) and travel and other expenses were paid. In the shire county focus group, two white British mothers attended. In the London borough, one mother and one father who were both white British attended, and one father of Indian origin. Whilst numbers were smaller than hoped, parents had a great deal to contribute and were interested in listening to other parents' stories. One mother commented that she had never had the opportunity before to discuss experiences with other parents of children in foster care. A smaller number of parents may have actually been more comfortable for the parents, given the sensitive and stigmatised nature of their experiences.

Analysis

Focus groups and interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed. The data was then analysed thematically using NVivo. Thematic analysis involves breaking down the text into categories or themes which are predetermined and/or emerge from the data. The codes that were applied to the data in this project followed the linear approach of the interview schedule and examined in-depth specific issues such as managing loss, parenting decisions, contact, social work support and identity.

These areas were coded conceptually with themes that were related to each time period or relationship, such as feelings, impact, control, responsibility etc. Within these themes other codes were applied to further refine the meanings. Once the data was coded, summaries of the themes were written for each interview to allow comparison across interviews. The data will be reported through an analytical narrative of themes drawn from the interviews and focus groups.

This method and the codes used were similar to those applied in the Norwegian and Swedish parallel projects, allowing for collaboration in the analysis across the three sites. This has meant that the value of each project has been maximised by the overall combined sample (n=67). It has also been valuable to learn from the differences and (mainly) similarities in parent experiences and social work practice from the different cultures and contexts.

Ethical issues

The interviews and focus groups with vulnerable parents were handled sensitively, in the context of informed consent and our commitment not to disclose the full interviews. The research team worked within the British Psychological Society Ethical Principles for Conducting Research and their Code of Conduct with regards to accessing and storing confidential information.

Findings

The findings will be reported here in terms of three related areas of focus.

- Each stage of the parents' experience, from parenting the child prior to care, through separation and up to the present, with an emphasis on the parents' changing relationship with the child, significantly through contact.
- Two further key relationships - with foster carers and social workers.
- The extent to which the parents still feel themselves to be in a parenting role – in particular, how they resolve their sense of *loss of identity* and how they manage *cognitive dissonance*; feeling themselves to be caring parents and yet having been judged by experts and courts to be unable to care for their children and so separated from them.

Parenting before the children went into care

The parents interviewed had almost all been parenting in contexts of adversity, in particular poverty and lack of family support. But they were diverse in some key aspects of their histories and especially diverse in their perceived role in their children coming into care. The overwhelming feeling, though, was of parents' lives being out of control – whether because of drug and alcohol, partner violence, their own emotional needs or the needs of the children. For some parents, problems had been there from the first pregnancy and they had then struggled increasingly as further children were born. Others had felt competent as parents initially, but then circumstances had changed for the worse. For some families the children's move into care followed a long process of anxiety for them and concerns expressed by agencies - and for others the unravelling seemed to happen suddenly and was triggered by a specific event, such as a partner going into prison.

The dominance of anxiety - and often fear - in these families' lives left parents unable to manage their own safety and mental well-being, but also put children's well-being at risk in ways that many parents were able to recognise. The data showed both common themes and some important differences in the way in which they viewed their parenting prior to the children coming into care. Although many parents appeared to have recognised that there

had been problems, there were parents who consistently denied that there had ever been any risks to the children and who were and remained angry with children's services, with courts - and with social workers in particular. This diversity became more apparent when they described the period of time and the process by which the children came into care.

When the children went into care

As the circumstances in which parents were living and children were growing up were dominated by adversities, coming into care was generally triggered by a combination of background risks that gradually built up to a crisis and or/ specific events that may have happened almost by chance to precipitate action that led to separation – action by social workers, police, the parents or by the children. The role of child protection systems and the court in this process were then significant in making judgements on the evidence that the children had experienced or were at risk of experiencing significant harm, and that their parenting was responsible (Children Act 1989).

Parents' sense of responsibility or blame for the children coming into care varied – as did their levels of anger and subsequent sense of whether it had been overall a good thing for the children. This led to some very different pathways across the dimensions of acceptance, responsibility, blame and anger. For example:

- Parents who *accepted their responsibility* and the child's *need for care* at the time and since, *appreciating* what foster care had done for the children and *valuing* social work support.
- Parents who were *angry* with professionals at the time but now accept *some responsibility* for the problems and see the benefit of care.
- Parents who remembered *accepting* the need for care at the time, but now talk more critically of having needed more support and think the children should have come home after the crisis was over.
- Parents who *blamed* and in some cases were *angry with the child* for being difficult to be cared for and therefore needing to be in care.
- Parents who were *angry* at the time, *blamed* social workers, did *not accept* the child's need for care and have not changed since – often becoming more angry, using years of 'evidence' to support their 'case', and often being *dismissive* of foster carers and the role they played in their children's lives.

Another dimension of difference that became apparent in these accounts was the extent of the parents' ability to reflect on the process of the children coming into care in a way that acknowledged the complexity of the situation - and in particular the complexity of their own feelings, the feelings of the child and the impact of their parenting on the child. Some parents were stuck rigidly in feelings they could not resolve or move on from, particularly feelings of anger or grief. Other parents showed a remarkable ability, given their difficult circumstances, to reflect on their own experiences and empathically on the experiences of their children.

It seemed that where loss of this kind occurred (i.e. loss of children, loss of role and loss of identity) the human mind is forced to draw on all its resources to find a way of telling this story that leaves them with some self-esteem, with some parent identity and with some comfort in relation to the children e.g. 'I couldn't have given the children what they now have'; 'Their education is so much better'; 'I was not entirely a bad parent - and I can still be a caring parent now.'

The experience of being a parent of children growing up in foster care

When considering the long-term experience of parents, it was significant how many parents were not only managing loss and separation, but were managing it in diverse forms. The larger sibling groups were often in a range of different kinds of placement (foster care, adoption, at home, with separated partners, with relatives) leading to different kinds of roles for parents, but making contact complex.

Most valuable in this study was this longer-term perspective from parents who had been separated from all or some of their children for up to 10 years. The process of facing this long-term separation often began either at court or soon afterwards, when permanence plans were made or confirmed. One commonly repeated theme in the data was some parents' experience of trying to sustain hope during proceedings, in spite of the evidence they were hearing - though others felt powerless and hopeless.

After the court, the parents often felt abandoned, as the attention of the professionals shifted towards putting the child's care plan into effect. This picture was supported by social workers in the focus groups, who accepted that too often in the flurry of activity to sort out placements and contact arrangements, support for the parents about the long-term loss of their child or children was not always available.

Two areas emerged as key to the parents' relationship with their children. First was information about their child and second was contact. These both played a part in parents' experience and perception of their ongoing role. The kind of information that parents valued was very varied and included not only school photographs and reports, but also updates on children's health, activities and what TV programmes their children enjoyed. This enabled them to feel connected and involved in a general way, but also helped them to choose presents or to feel able to talk to them over the phone or at face to face contact.

Social workers were important sources of information, but for a more detailed day to day picture, parents looked to foster carers. The quality and frequency of information thus depended very much on the attitude and efficiency of social workers or the willingness of foster carers to be open. Whatever the reason, when parents felt starved of information, it often led to an increase in negativity – thus parents became more anxious, more angry, more sad or more detached.

One major source of information – and so of great significance for the parents – was contact with their children. Once plans had been made for children to remain in foster care, parents often experienced some reduction in contact. This reduction might occur when the child moved to a long-term placement or in the same placement once the decision was made for it to become long-term. It was through contact that parents maintained whatever quality of relationship with their child was possible - and to a large extent their parental role. Parents talked of looking forward to contact, but often finding it difficult, particularly when there was a big sibling group or it was supervised.

For parents of adolescents, even when face to face contact was limited or supervised, there was contact by mobile phone, which was often unregulated. Some parents talked of ringing or texting their teenage children daily, often at regular times, for example, bedtime. This kind of contact at intimate times was highly valued by parents – but raised important issues about how children and foster carers experienced this rather graphic route for a birth mother to have the last word of the day.

Parents' relationships with foster carers and social workers

Parents had the task of coming to terms with the fact that another family was looking after their children – was deemed more competent to do so and was being paid to do so. As these children were in long-term foster care, parents had to accept messages that these carers were expected to be more than carers - in some important ways they were to be parents. Not only would carers be expected to attend school parents' evenings, they could sign certain permissions and, in some cases, children starting to call carers 'mum' and 'dad' and carers' parents, 'nanny' and 'granddad'. Parents talked of their sense that carers had the parenting role '24/7'.

Relationships between parents and foster carers varied from relationships of mutual trust, respect and liking with free and open communication between them, through cool but manageable negotiated relationships, to ongoing anger and resentment towards foster carers by parents. One of the most striking findings from the study was how many parents had almost no contact at all with the foster carers who were looking after their children; they were not invited to reviews where carers were present, nor able to see them or speak to them around contact. Some parents had not talked face to face with the carers since a first meeting as many as eight years ago.

This seemed to present potential problems for all parties: carers would be left with information about the parents that was now years out of date. Parents may have got worse or better – more into drugs or completely off drugs for example- but carers would not see this, as the children were seeing it. Similarly parents might be left, as some were, with a memory of a carer who at first meeting had seemed distant or judgemental and this image continued to make them angry and upset. Children were left with the task of moving between the two 'parents', managing the amount of information they passed about each to the other and somehow almost certainly managing the two sets of parents' anxiety about each other.

Parents' feelings towards foster carers were inevitably complex – and interacted in not always predictable ways with feelings about why the child was in care, and who was responsible. Some parents who had been and remained angry about the children being in care saw the foster carers as representatives of the powerful force that was social services. But the majority of parents distinguished carers from social workers, often appreciating the qualities of foster carers while seeing social workers as the 'authorities' they either had to negotiate with or do battle with in order to defend their identity as parents.

Being a parent of a child in foster care: managing a threatened identity

These differing experiences and relationships with their children, the foster carers and the social workers, arose in part as a result of the different *strategies* parents used to manage their *threatened identity as parents*; in the context of absent children, negative judgements having been made on them as parents, the lack of current parenting roles and responsibilities, and social stigma.

Parents had to resolve not only their loss of a child or children, but also their loss of self-esteem and identity. Thus anger, sadness, resignation, denial, co-operation, acceptance, (often in combination) were all ways in which parents expressed and managed their feelings and sense of self. Parents' narratives in the interviews had to explain and 'justify' to the researcher how and why they had become 'non-resident' parents – reflecting a process that goes on every day of their lives as they explain and justify to themselves and to others in

their social networks their situation as parents of children who were growing up in foster care rather than with them.

Key messages for social work practice

The study has led to key conclusions that are shared across the UK, Swedish and Norwegian sites and operate on two levels. First are the most straightforward and easily available themes - the parents' detailed and often moving feedback on experiences before and since the children came into care. This has provided ideas about each stage of social work intervention: family support; child protection; court, contact, reviews and leaving care.

But second, and equally important, is the fundamental theme of how each parent's strategy for managing their parenting identity needs to be understood if social workers are going to work effectively – to support parents and to help them to be as constructive as possible in relation to their child's well-being. Expressions of anger or sadness or acceptance need to be understood in the broader context of that parent's history and coping strategies.

Activities

Presentations

Presentations have already been given drawing on the data and acknowledging ESRC funding at a London conference for 100 social workers (BAAF October 2008). A further presentation was given to the BAAF Research Group Advisory Committee meeting (May 2009).

Dr Emma Ward will present this research at the 3rd International Fostering Network conference in Switzerland (September 2009). Further dissemination events are planned for the participant local authorities (October /November 2009).

Outputs

The key combination will be international articles in academic journals produced by the three research partners, and a book by the UK team at UEA that will provide detailed qualitative data as well as offering a practice guide for social workers.

Impacts

Findings from this research will inform future developments in foster care policy and practice, not only through presentations and publications, but by incorporation within the range of fostering projects at UEA led by the principle investigator, Professor Schofield, that are disseminated nationally and internationally to policy makers and practice planners.

Future Research Priorities

One key area of research that can build on this study would be in the area of parental contact with children in foster placements. We have been able to build aspects of our findings regarding contact from this study into our current study on care planning for permanence in foster care, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, due to report 2010.

A further research priority would be the situation regarding drug using parents and risk to children – in particular the knowledge and attitudes of professionals who are involved in assessing and supporting them.